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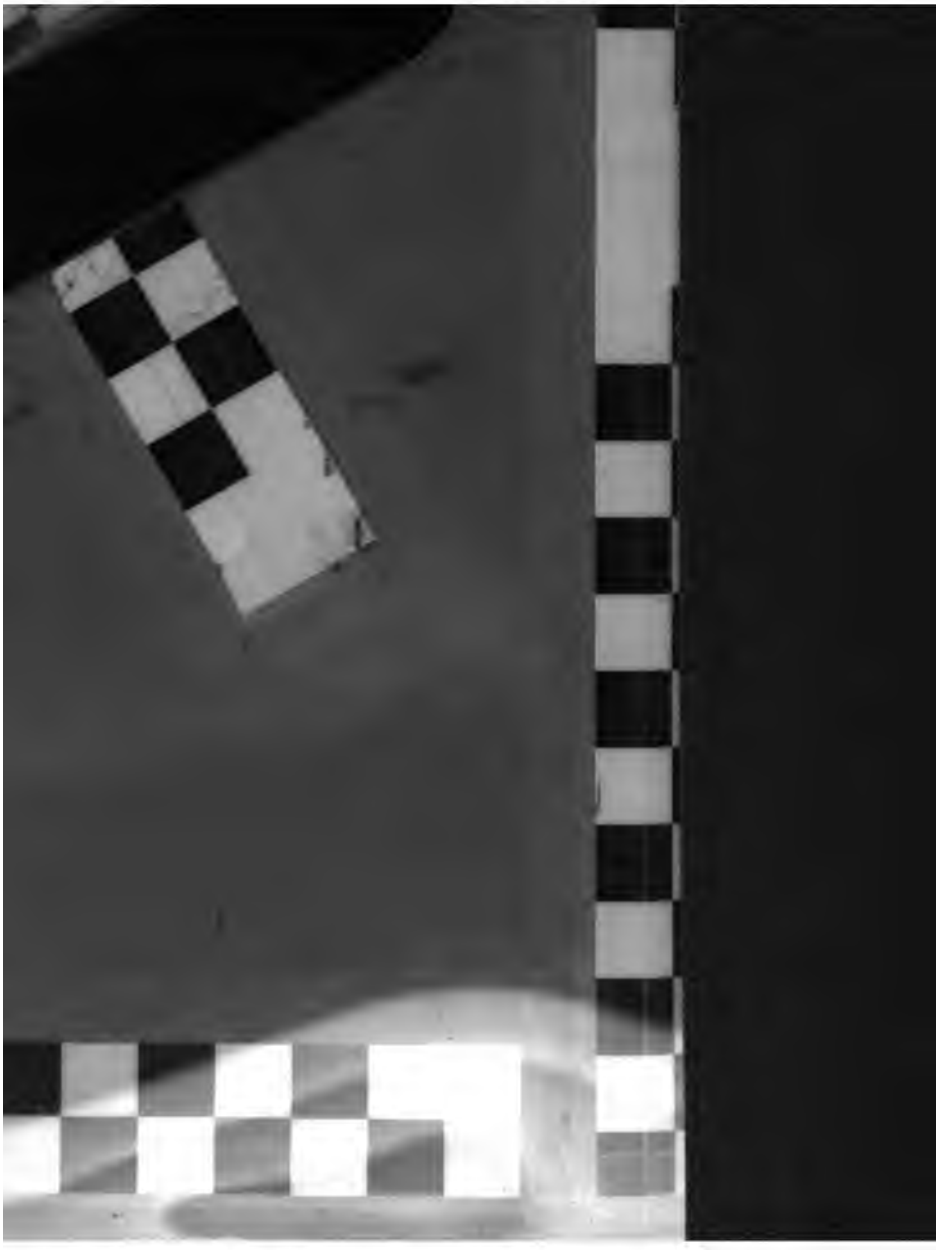
By

SWAMI PRAKASHANANDA



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SWAMI PRAKASHANANDA

Delivered at the Congress of Religious Philosophies, held under the auspices of P. P. I. E. at San Francisco in 1915

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THE UNIVERSALITY OF VEDANTA

Our Motherland, India, and our religion, have not infrequently been grossly misrepresented. People in Western countries seldom go to the right sources for information. There are, for instance, the orthodox Christian missionaries, who, carried away by their enthusiasm to bring light to the so-called benighted heathen, would not hesitate to exaggerate or misstate the conditions of India and misinterpret the various phases of Hinduism.

Then, again, there are the foreign travellers who skim over the country, stop in hotels and come in contact with their Anglo-Indian friends. They see only the squalor and the famine, or the gorgeous temples and other superficial things, and thus fail, in not a few cases, to touch the inner spring of Indian religious life. And these people write books on Indian religion and the socio-moral principles of the people! What can you expect but a caricature of one of the sublimest religions in the world? If the tourists passing through the different countries of Europe and America, judge the western peoples and their religion sweepingly by observing the slums, the graft and reckless sacrifice of high moral principles in socio-political life, they un-

of the essence of the East; the balm of Gilead for the wounds of England, the cordial of India for the tire of America."

Students of religion sometimes become confused over the different names applied to the religion of the Hindus. The word 'Hindu' originated from the name of a river, Indus, in the Northwestern part of India, which in Sanskrit is called Sindhu. The Persian invaders often pronounced 'S' as 'H', so the people living beyond the river were designated by them as Hindus, and their religion was called 'Hinduism.' Now, people of all classes in different faiths—such as Christians, Jews, Parsees, Mohammedans, etc., are living in different parts of India, so the term 'Hinduism' cannot be rightly applied to the religion of the various classes of people. The term 'Brahmanism' given by the foreign missionaries and scholars to the religion of the Hindus has also lost its significance. Undoubtedly, there was a time when the Brahmans were the custodians of the religions of the Hindus, but now-a-days the Brahmans represent the priestly class who have ceased to be the true leaders of religion. The proper name for the religion of the Hindus would be 'Vedic Religion' or 'Vedanta'.

In order to understand a religion, we should know its founder as well as its scriptures. The

question can be rightly asked, "who is the founder of Hinduism?" In reply we are proud to say that Hinduism is not built around the personality of a founder, as Christianity is founded on the divine personality of Christ, or as Mohammedanism is based on the personality of Mohammed. Hinduism, on the other hand, is based on the impersonal and eternal verities of life and creation.

Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so it is with the laws and principles that govern the universe. The moral, ethical and spiritual relations between soul and soul, and between individual spirits and the universal Spirit, were there before their discovery and would remain even if we forgot them. The discoverers of these principles are called Rishis or seers of truth. They are honored and worshipped as God-men and perfected souls. It would be interesting to know that some of the very greatest of them were women.

Though Hinduism is based on the eternal and impersonal truths underlying creation, still it accepts personal founders and recognizes the necessity of personal ideals. Here lies the true universality of Vedanta. Those God-men who discover and also represent in their life the impersonal divine principles are accepted by Hin-

duism. Hinduism accepts all that existed in the past and will accept those who will come in the future.

As Christians have the Bible; Buddhists, the Tripitaka; Mohammedans, the Koran; so have Hindus the Vedas. In order to get an insight into the Hindu religious philosophies, one must study three **Prasthanas** (pathways to knowledge): theUpanishads, which are the cream of the Vedas; Gita, which has been translated as 'Song Celestial' by Sir Edwin Arnold; Vyasa-Sutras or Vedanta Aphorisms, by Badarayana Vyasa. Well has it been said by Paul Deussen; "On the tree of Indian Wisdom there is no fairer flower than the Upanishads, no finer fruit than the Vedanta Philosophy." The great German philosopher, Schopenhauer, said in appreciation of the Upanishads: "In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death." Professor Max Muller says: "There was one religion only, or one religious philosophy, that of the Vedanta, which . . . . placed the highest happiness of the soul in the discovery and recovery of its true nature as from eternity to eternity one with God. It—the Vedanta—has room for almost every religion; nay, it embraces them all."

Not a few scholars have an erroneous notion that Vedanta Philosophy is only monistic. In reality, Vedanta includes dualism, qualified non-dualism, and monism. Sankaracharya wrote commentaries on Vedanta Aphorisms and established the monistic school of thought. Ramanuja wrote commentaries on the same aphorisms and expounded the qualified non-dualistic system. Madhvacharya also wrote commentaries on these aphorisms and established the dualistic school of thought. There are other books which are called 'Puranas' and 'Smritis'. Smritis are ethical codes and Puranas try to inculcate the sublime teachings of the Upanishads through historical records of the life deeds of the sages and saviours and mythological stories. While the Upanishads form the basis of all these various scriptures, the Gita has become the Bible of the Hindus. Besides these, there are six systems of philosophy which time will not permit me to explain in detail. Professor Max Muller's "Six Schools of Vedanta Philosophy" will give the reader some idea about these wonderful systems. But the Hindus do not reject or condemn the other bibles of different religions. "Those who realize the Truth become one with It. Their words are the Vedas or scriptures. Expressed in Sanskrit or any other language, they will dispell the doubts of our hearts."

Thus declared **Nischaldas**, the celebrated author of the book, called Vichar-Sagar (Ocean of Discrimination).

Religion, according to the Hindus, does not consist in believing in doctrines or dogmas, neither in book learning nor in intellectual understanding, but in living the life. Religion is realization. The object of religion is to lead you to a plane of development where 'Vedas become no Vedas,' i.e., scriptures become insufficient and fall short. You have to come face to face with the Supreme. You must attain the direct realization. Books have value in so far as they stimulate in us the desire to realize.

From the highest idea of absolutism to the lowest idea of symbolic worship, each has found a place in Hinduism. God is one, infinite and absolute Being, but has different aspects. Aspirants at different stages of growth have different conceptions of the same indivisible Being. The highest aspect is called 'Nirguna Brahman,' (unqualified Absolute Spirit). The Infinite cannot be properly expressed through attributes. By attributes, we qualify and limit the Unlimited. Even words are not adequate to express the glory, grandeur and sublimity of the Infinite. "Whence words shrink back with the mind unable to reach It." Thus sang the Sages of the Upanishads.

So there is a lower aspect of God which is called 'Saguna Brahman,' (Qualified, or God with attributes). But when we try to think of God who is the essence of blessed abstract qualities, we find it almost impossible to do so without associating God with some personality. Qualities or attributes are so indissolubly connected, that without corresponding personality we fail to comprehend the corresponding attributes. Hence, arose the necessity of a personal God. Then the idea of a personal God is incomprehensible to the majority of people without some concrete form or God-man, such as Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, etc. Again, through association of ideas, some symbols, statues and images enable the aspirant to grasp the higher ideal more quickly and satisfactorily. Image-worship, or symbolic worship, has not infrequently been condemned as idolatry. But when forms and symbols are taken as aids to grasp the higher truths and principles, they are not only harmless, but beneficial and necessary. If we go on decorating and nourishing our body without remembering the embodied soul, we become idolaters. Why is the cross holy? Why is the crescent sacred? Why do we go to churches for worship? Why do we kneel before altars? We cannot enclose God within four walls, nor can we limit Him to an altar. These are all

symbols and attempts of the undeveloped mind to grasp the higher and higher truths. The Hindus assert that it makes no difference wherefrom help comes. Hindus can go to a church, a mosque, or a temple and accept any symbols, as long as it would lead them on to higher and higher realization. We never travel from error to truth, but from lower truth to higher truth. The highest aim of religion is to go to the Infinite, through different steps.

All religions begin with dualism, but end in monism. In the dualistic state, God is an extra-cosmic Being. We ascribe human relations unto Him. Hindus not only understand the fatherhood of God, but also the motherhood. In fatherhood there is a tinge of fear, but motherhood is a sweeter and closer relation. The true divine love must be without fear. The fatherly conception of God can be traced back to the Vedic conception, **Dous Pitar,** or 'Father in Heaven' and Greek worship of Jupiter, **Zeus Pitar.** But the Hindu mind did not stop there. They discovered that these relations of individual souls to the Divine Spirit may be grand, but they are undoubtedly human and make the Divine Spirit anthropomorphic.

The higher aspect of God was gradually revealed to them. God is no longer distant and extra-cosmic, but intra-cosmic. He is the all-

immanent Spirit energizing everything. We are all part and parcel of that 'one stupendous whole'. We are in constant touch with That, but we are ignorant of the fact. Still we grow and evolve, until it is discovered that the relation of son to father, that of the beloved to the source of love, even that of the part to the whole will not satisfy the soul. Nothing short of oneness or merging will bring that perfect contentment. The spiritual oneness is the final realization of religious life, when, with Jesus, we would say, "I and my Father are one;" when we shall say with Krishna, "I am that unborn and all-pervading Supreme Being; and with the Vedic sages we would declare, "Soham," (I am That).

"Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divine within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy, by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details."—Swami Vivekananda.

So there is a chance for all. The difference between a saint and an ordinary soul lies not in kind, but in degree. The divine light of the soul cannot be destroyed, only covered, as the sun is covered by the clouds. Accordingly,

Hinduism never teaches any absurd doctrine like eternal damnation. Sooner or later, each soul will reach the Universal Source.

There are different paths leading to the same goal. Human nature may be approximately classified under four heads: emotional, analytical, meditative and active. Just as the kind and benevolent mother prepares different dishes according to the various tastes and constitutions of different children, even so has Hinduism laid down different paths of God-realization according to the various spiritual tendencies and temperaments of persons placed in different stages of evolution. These paths are called 'Yogas'—such as Bhakti, Yoga, path of devotion; Jnana Yoga, path of knowledge; Raja Yoga, path of concentration; and Karma Yoga, path of action.

We talk so glibly about universal religion. Religion, in order to be universal, must be as broad as the heavens above and deep as the oceans beneath, and in its catholicity, would embrace and include all faiths and try to help all natures. There is another way of establishing universal religion by seeing harmony in all. If we thoroughly understood the principles of 'unity in variety,' and applied it in the religious field, there would be harmony of religions. As long as there will be diversified natures and temperaments, different religions and sects are

inevitable. But that does not mean that there must be sectarianism! Just as there are so many radii converging to the same center, so the different religions and sects are many ways leading to the same God.

Those who think they cannot be devoted to their faith without condemning others, are entirely mistaken. We need devotion—not fanaticism! The dogmatic attitude that 'my religion is the only religion; my saviour, the only saviour' betrays not only narrowness, but formidable ignorance. Fanaticism, bigotry and narrow-mindedness have often played a conspicuous part in religion. The time has come when we should outgrow these, broaden our views and expand our vision. Let us be devoted to our own, and at the same time give liberty to others to follow theirs.

Harmony of religions does not mean that all religions will be supplanted by one particular religion. Notwithstanding our fanatical attitude toward other religions, those faiths which are fed by the fountain of eternal light and wisdom, will remain for the betterment and upliftment of humanity. As in an orchestra, various instruments, played properly, produce a wonderful harmony, so let all the true religions and faiths remain in their places and do their proper share, and let us bid adieu to all

uncharitable spirit by recognizing the unity of purpose and aim to be one and the same.

The idea of universal harmony first arose in the Vedic age, when it was declared; "Ekam sat vipra vahudha vadanti"—(That which exists is one, the sages call It by various names). Coming down through the corridors of time to the fourteenth century B.C., we come upon Sri Krishna, a mighty spirit, who declared; "In whatever way men worship Me, in the same way do I fulfill their desires. It is My path, O son of Kunti, men tread in all ways." (Gita, chapter IV-11). In the Vedas we see the germ and here we see the plant, but it was reserved for the ninetenth century to produce a wonderful soul in Sri Ramakrishna who was the perfect embodiment of universal harmony. Here the plant had grown to be a gigantic tree, under the shade of which men and women of different paths and religions found rest.

May He who is Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians; Jehovah of the Jews; Father in Heaven of the Christians; Allah of the Mohammedans; and Brahman and the Divine Mother of the Hindus—and God of all nations and religions, give us the true understanding and the strength to carry the universal harmony into our daily lives.

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